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Reagan set to sell jet update to Peking

By Edward Neilan
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The Reagan administration will announce within a few weeks a \$500 million arms sale package to the People's Republic of China that will significantly upgrade Peking's F-8 jet fighters, a Defense Department official said yesterday.

The sale "will not alter the military balance in the Taiwan straits," the official said.

"The details and security implications of the sale have been thoroughly debated by the Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs, State Department, National Security Council, Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency, and there has been interagency agreement that we should proceed," said Edward Ross, assistant for China, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

The six-year project, which will be supervised by the U.S. Air Force, will enhance radar and navigational equipment on 50 F-8s, Mr. Ross said. The delta-wing planes were built in the 1960s in China to defend against the Soviet Union.

The sale, which Congress is likely to approve, comes on the heels of the first foreign military sales agreement with China, a \$98 million project announced last September, including plans for an artillery munitions factory and technical specifications for 155mm projectiles.

The United States has already sold China civilian versions of the Sikorsky Black Hawk helicopter, General Electric LM2500 gas turbine engines for warships, Raytheon DE1167 towed sonar and MK 46 Mod 2 torpedoes.

Other sales under discussion for 1986 are General Electric F404 jet engines, Light Airborne Multi-Purpose System MK-I anti-submarine warfare equipment, improved surface-to-air missiles and E-2C Hawkeye early-warning aircraft.

Some congressional sources oppose the developing policy of arms sales to China on the basis that they tip the balance of military power of the China vs. Taiwan equation in favor of China.

The most advanced fighter aircraft in Taiwan's arsenal is the F-5E, a plane without the all-weather capability of the F-8.

Sen. Frank Murkowski, an Alaska Republican, said yesterday: "These arms and avionics sales to China must be examined closely in light of our relations with Taiwan. We must continue to walk the tightrope between Peking and Taipei, even though the sales may be in our interests in holding the Soviets at bay."

Mr. Murkowski was speaking at the same Heritage Foundation seminar on "U.S.-China Relations" at which Mr. Ross gave what one diplomat said was "the most comprehensive administration report to date on the China arms sales issue."

Mr. Murkowski, chairman of the subcommittee on East Asia and Pacific of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said he would object to the avionics sale if "it turns out that Taiwan's security is seriously compromised as a result."

All arguments have been heard regarding short- and long-term security and other considerations for the United States and its Asian allies, Mr. Ross said. He said the sale "will not alter the military balance in the Taiwan straits because the F-8 will never go near that area."

Asked if the administration had Peking's assurances on that point, Mr. Ross said, "It would be poor form to press China on such matters which relate to sovereignty, but just say we are confident the F-8 will be used for the role it was designed to fulfill."

Another panelist, June Dreyer, professor of political science at the University of Miami, said the real subject of concern in the Taiwan straits should be a possible naval blockade by China of Taiwan's ports and shipping, which are "extremely vulnerable" to such action.

Quoting a Malaysian defense official, Ms. Dreyer said U.S. policy was like "the feeding of a baby python in your back yard, which seems harmless. But before long the python grows."

Mr. Ross replied: "The willingness of the United States to develop a military relationship with China is founded on the assessment that we share parallel interests, both globally and regionally. Foremost among these is a common security concern — the growing threat posed by the Soviet Union."